



# 'Fun fair' for dogs

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If you want your shy, stay-at-home pet to socialise, start preparing for the annual Dogathon.

I'm generally speaking not a fan of animal expos and pet shows because I see too many stressed pets. However, the one exception is the Dogathon, the annual get-together at Bukit Ekspo UPM, Serdang, Selangor. First held in 1997, it has become an iconic event for local dog lovers.

"I love the fact that it's outdoors," says Olive Chan, owner of Lizzy, Alice and Ocean who are all four years old, and Tia who's two.

"Despite being a li'l hot sometimes, it's easy to take our dogs around to walk about, compared to an indoor event. I love it because we get to socialise and I also learn new things about dogs from them."

"The Dogathon is very much like a doggie fun fair for my Boy," Anne Ng Swee Kim observes. "Boy is about seven years old and this is his opportunity to socialise. I think it's good for him to be exposed to new and strange smells, and to eat treats at the booths."

"I took Nobita, my old Afghan hound, two years ago for the first time," H.K. Tan says. "As he's eight, he's too old for some of the activities, so we just entered the races. Nobita loved meeting up with all his friends, and I enjoyed having people take his photo, meeting lots of dog lovers, sharing experiences and letting people learn about sight hounds."

This year's Dogathon is expected



SPCA reps and dogs among the merry crowd at Dogathon 2014. — Filepic

to draw some 4,000 people, along with about 1,300 dogs. If, like me, you've been avoiding big gatherings but you'd like to join in this one, there are some things to think about.

First, it's really well organised because it's run by UPM veterinary students and their friends from other departments and schools.

"We give each and every dog a

free physical," Chrisann Po, one of the team members points out. "This ensures that everyone at the Dogathon is healthy. However, we don't allow bitches who are on heat, and aggressive dogs, to join."

These rules make sure that everyone has a good time. When I went, I was amazed to see so many pets mingling happily. However, just like small humans at a big

party, an overwhelmed dog may just want to go home, or become so hyper that all your careful training goes out the window.

There are lots of activities at the Dogathon that anyone may enter but some of the events require that you and your pet have certain skills.

As such, if you want to go, but your dog isn't used to this kind of

event, do think about getting ready for the Dogathon in gradual stages.

If your dog is a stay-at-home pet, meeting other dogs might be a nerve-wracking experience. You can help break the ice by having a series of play dates with one sensible, gentle dog at a time.

Once your pet has positive experiences, gradually start doubling and tripling play dates.





Owners letting their pets cool down after the 1.5km race at UPM's Dogathon 2004. — Filepic

If your pet is generally confident, find a dog park and spend a few mornings there. To lower the excitement level, start by running off your pet's excess energy by having a quick game of fetch – or a swim, if there's a lake! Then mingle on the edges of the crowd, keeping out an eye for bullying, and shutting down any little spats that may occur.

You may discover that your pet

listens to you at home but not when beset by the excitement of hanging with a gang of other pets. Don't worry too much. A second or third visit may be enough to sort that out. If you think it's not enough, then go back to having mini training sessions, just like when your pet was a puppy.

If you plan to enter the games, you may want to be training any-

way. There will be a dozen or so Dogathon games, from HulaWoof to Feasdival, but many share core obedience skills. If your pet can walk on a leash, sit and stay, and play fetch where he or she goes to retrieve items from a field, you'll have most of the games nailed.

Most of all though, the Dogathon is about having fun. Hope to see you there!

## Brief history of doggy events

THERE'S little doubt that farmers and hunters have always had friendly competitions to see who has the best dog. We also know that the Tang emperors prized their Chow Chows; that Persian and Egyptian ancient royalty sent each other Salukis; and that the British king, Charles II, was plagued by people who wanted his spaniel puppies.

However, the modern history of dog competitions started around the 1850s. At this time, people became interested in eugenics, a theory that proposed we can improve mankind through controlled breeding. While we keep going as always, the idea of pedigrees sparked the foundation of kennel clubs and began formalising the dog-breeding industry.

The first ever dog show where pointers and setters were given prizes for their purebred looks was held on June 28, 1859, in Newcastle upon Tyne, England. The first sheep dog trials took place in Wanaka, New Zealand, in 1867 while the first formal greyhound track race was held in Hendon, England, in 1876. The oldest canine club in Asia is the Ceylon Kennel Club, established in 1899.

Today, dog events come in all sorts of flavours. The most common are Dog Shows or Conformation Shows, a type of perfect beauty contest where dogs are compared to kennel club standards. Obedience and Sheepdog Trials test doggy skills and human-pet co-operation. Dog Agility Trials are like assault course contests for pets, while Tracking Trials are like scent treasure hunts.

The Dogathon is unusual because it's outdoors, very informal and geared towards having fun rather than being the best. Also, it's a charity event geared towards raising funds for a catch-neuter-and-release programme run by the non-profit group, Pro-Kasih.

In 2014, Pro-Kasih received RM7,000 from this event, excluding sponsorship, a great push towards controlling the stray dog population in Malaysia.

This year's Dogathon will be held on Sunday, Feb 28, from 6.30am to 2pm, so you're there during the cool of the morning. There's no entry fee, but if you enter events, you'll have to pay a few ringgit per dog. For maps and more details, type Dogathon into the Facebook search bar.



Dogs and their handlers enjoying an event at Dogathon 2013. — Filepic/UPM